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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 003545

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PROP](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#) [AUC](#) [ELN](#) [FARC](#)

SUBJECT: DECIPHERING THE SIZE OF ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) According to the Colombian Ministry of Defense (MOD), at least 20,000 Colombian terrorists, both paramilitaries and guerrillas, have deserted or been captured or killed in combat with government forces since President Alvaro Uribe took office in August 2002. Still, the estimated numerical strengths of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and paramilitary groups such as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) have not seen corresponding declines. This apparent contradiction can largely be explained by: (1) continued terrorist recruiting, (2) truncated criminal cases against terrorist suspects, (3) GOC actions that target urban militias and civilian terrorist support networks not included in MOD estimates of terrorist strength, and (4) estimates influenced by the institutional responsibilities of particular government entities. Although the exact size of Colombian terrorist groups will never be known with certainty, it is clear that the GOC is hitting terrorist groups -- both paramilitaries and guerrillas -- and their civilian supporters harder than ever before. End Summary.

The Numbers in a Nutshell

2. (SBU) The Colombian Ministry of Defense (MOD) reports that between January 2003 and March 2004, nearly 800 paramilitaries and 2,000 members of the National Liberation Army (ELN) and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) deserted. Since President Uribe's inauguration in August 2002, the MOD reports that nearly 500 paramilitaries and 2,800 members of the FARC and ELN were killed in combat and over 4,200 paramilitaries and 9,350 members of the FARC and ELN were captured by GOC security forces. In addition, over 1,000 paramilitaries voluntarily demobilized near the end of 2003. Thus, according to official figures, approximately 6,500 paramilitaries and 14,200 guerrillas have been taken off the battlefield in the last 19 months. However, estimates of the numerical strengths of the FARC, ELN, and paramilitary groups have not fallen consistent with these figures.

3. (C) According to the Department's 2002 and 2003 human rights reports on Colombia, which used figures similar to official GOC estimates, the FARC lost only 3,000 combatants in 2003 and the ELN only 1,000, while paramilitary strength remained unchanged (the 2003 report estimates there are 13,500 FARC members, 3,500 ELN, and 12,000 paramilitaries). These relatively small declines in official estimates of terrorist strength raise questions about the accuracy of GOC figures on desertions and casualties suffered by terrorist organizations. However, most of the apparent discrepancies can be accounted for by continued terrorist recruitment, truncated criminal cases against terrorist suspects, GOC actions that target urban militias and civilian terrorist support networks not included in MOD estimates of terrorist strength, and estimates influenced by the institutional responsibilities of particular government entities.

Recruitment Continues

4. (C) Aggressive recruiting efforts by illegal armed groups compensate for many desertions and casualties. The GOC does not keep statistics on terrorist recruiting, primarily because most takes place in areas beyond GOC control. However, it is clear that illegal armed groups continue to add thousands of new members to their ranks, sometimes by force. In some regions, new recruits fully offset losses from desertions, detentions, and deaths. Recruiting occurs primarily in poor rural areas where illegal armed groups exercise de facto control. The FARC, for instance, obtains most of its recruits from the eastern departments of Meta and Caqueta. In many of these economically backward regions, joining an illegal armed group is a seemingly attractive option. For similar reasons, illegal armed groups have found rich recruiting grounds in urban slums, especially on the outskirts of Medellin and in southern Bogota.

15. (C) FARC deserters often report joining guerrilla ranks because of FARC promises to care for their impoverished families. A significant percentage of other FARC deserters claim they were forcibly recruited, although the self-selecting nature of this group makes it difficult to extrapolate a reliable percentage of FARC recruiting that is forcible. The ELN, weakened by conflict with paramilitaries and increased GOC military pressure, has difficulty recruiting new members outside of regions where it still enjoys well-established grassroots support, such as the departments of Arauca and Norte de Santander. Paramilitary recruits most often join for the promise of a regular, relatively generous salary.

Many Detainees are Released without Trial

16. (C) Another factor offsetting GOC military and law enforcement actions against illegal armed groups is the fact many detainees are released soon after they are captured. The military often detains large groups of persons suspected of affiliation with terrorist groups. Representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office ("Fiscalia"), who generally accompany military operations, take charge of these individuals and check their identities against the names of known fugitives. If there are no outstanding arrest warrants against an individual and no additional incriminating evidence is immediately available, the suspect must be released. Because Colombian terrorist groups do not have internationally recognized "belligerent" status, the GOC must treat each individual case as a law enforcement matter, significantly limiting its ability to incapacitate suspected terrorists.

17. (C) Even when fresh evidence or outstanding arrest warrants legally justify a more lengthy detention, Colombian law generally requires that detainees be released if the Government fails to file charges against them within 180 days of their arrest. For example, in November 2002, 85 persons were detained in Arauca department on suspicion of ties to the ELN. However, only 43 were held beyond the initial screening stage, and 37 were released months later because the 180 day period -- legally extended in this case under a terrorism exception -- expired before criminal charges were filed. Hence, although MOD statistics reflect that 85 terrorist supporters were arrested, only six actually remain in custody. The GOC does not keep records on how many detainees are released. The National Penitentiary Institute (INPEC) reports that approximately 19,000 persons were imprisoned for all types of crimes in the past 19 months. If over 13,500 members of illegal armed groups were captured during this same time frame, it is probable that large numbers of suspected terrorists were released without trial or ruled "not guilty."

Urban Militias and Support Networks Confuse the Numbers

18. (C) Urban militias and civilian logistical and intelligence support networks contribute significantly to the operations of illegal armed groups. However, their numbers are notoriously difficult to estimate, and are not included in overall estimates of terrorist strength. Most law enforcement operations against terrorist groups, especially in urban areas, target support networks rather than combatants. For example, on March 28, Colombian authorities arrested 65 supporters of the FARC's Teofilo Forero Mobile Column (TFMC); it is unlikely that more than a handful of these individuals were included in official GOC estimates of FARC numbers. However, these arrests -- and arrests and deaths of other members of urban militias and terrorist support networks -- are included in GOC statistics on actions against illegal armed groups.

Institutional Environments Influence Opinions

19. (C) Particular institutional environments also affect how organizations in Colombia, whether government or private, formulate statistics on illegal armed groups. For example, MOD estimates of the number of paramilitary fighters have remained at or near 12,000 for several years. However, the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, which is hoping to receive international support for its efforts to negotiate the demobilization of the AUC, has claimed that as many as 22,000 paramilitaries could demobilize as a result of its efforts. We suspect that the responsibilities of the High Commissioner's Office color its interpretation of available data and its public estimates of paramilitary strength. Undoubtedly, the opinions of other entities are also affected, albeit perhaps subconsciously, by their own institutional interests.

Comment

110. (C) Even within the MOD, there are discrepancies and disagreements about terrorist strength. What is clear, however, is that the GOC is hitting terrorist groups -- both paramilitaries and guerrillas -- and their civilian support networks harder than it ever has before.

WOOD